

# Evolutionary distinctiveness of the extinct Yunnan box turtle (*Cuora yunnanensis*) revealed by DNA from an old museum specimen

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Recd 07.04.04; Accptd 17.05.04; Published online

***Cuora yunnanensis* is an extinct turtle known from 12 specimens collected from Yunnan, China, before 1908. We used ancient DNA methods to sequence 1723 base pairs of mitochondrial DNA from a museum specimen of *C. yunnanensis*. Unlike some rare 'species' recently described from the pet trade, *C. yunnanensis* represents a lineage that is distinct from other known turtles. Besides *C. yunnanensis*, two other valid species (*C. mccordi*, *C. zhoui*) are unknown in the wild but are supposedly from Yunnan. Intensive field surveys for surviving wild populations of these critically endangered species are urgently needed.**

**Keywords:** *Cuora yunnanensis*; ancient DNA; extinction; endangered species; China; turtle

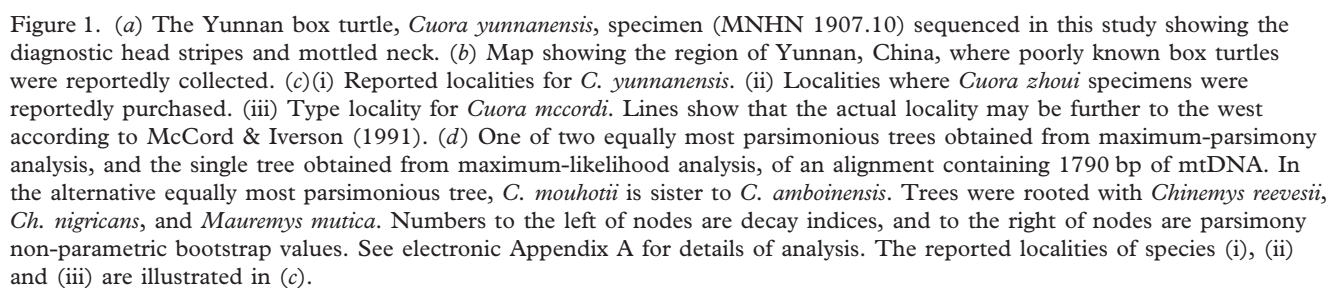
## 1. INTRODUCTION

Asia's turtle fauna is highly threatened by over-harvesting for food, medicine and the international pet trade (van Dijk *et al.* 2000). Included in this threatened fauna is a suite of species known only by specimens obtained from Asian food markets, turtle farms and pet dealers: for example, *Cuora mccordi*, *C. serrata*, *C. zhoui*, *Mauremys iversoni*, *M. pritchardi*, *Ocadia philippeni*, *O. glyphistoma* and *O. pseudocellata* (Fritz & Obst 1998, 1999; Parham *et al.* 2001); or by very few specimens in the wild, for example, *C. pani*, *Heosemys depressa*, *H. leytensis* and *Leucocephalon yuwonoi* (Fritz & Obst 1998, 1999; Parham & Li 1999; Platt *et al.* 2001, 2003a; Diesmos *et al.* 2004).

Recent molecular studies have revealed that some of Asia's poorly known turtles represent hybrids of better-known species (Parham *et al.* 2001; Wink *et al.* 2001; Spinks *et al.* 2004), some share mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) haplotypes suggesting introgression or recent divergences (Barth *et al.* 2003; Stuart & Parham 2004), and some represent ancient, independently evolving lineages (McCord *et al.* 2000; Barth *et al.* 2004; Spinks *et al.* 2004; Stuart & Parham 2004). At the same time, recent field efforts have located new populations of highly threatened Asian turtle species in the wild (Platt *et al.* 2001, 2003a–c; Diesmos *et al.* 2004). Clearly, molecular studies can play an important role in conservation policy by identifying distinct evolutionary lineages of turtles, and directing limited conservation resources towards finding and protecting these in the wild (van Dijk 2000; Parham *et al.* 2001).

One of Asia's least known turtle species, the Yunnan box turtle, *Cuora yunnanensis* (Boulenger 1906), is known from just 12 museum specimens. These were either purchased from natural history specimen dealers who obtained them from Yunnan, southern China, before 1908, or have no associated data (see electronic Appendix A). *Cuora yunnanensis* is now listed as extinct in the 2003 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2003), meaning 'there is no reasonable doubt that the last individual has died'. The species was listed as extinct owing to a complete lack of verifiable records since those 12 specimens were collected (despite very high levels of turtle trade in Yunnan), and because one of its two known sites of occurrence has disappeared under the expanding city of Kunming (Zhao 1998; Lau & Shi 2000; IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group and Asian Turtle Trade Working Group 2000; IUCN 2003). The circumstances of the description of *C. yunnanensis* (purchased specimens and no field observations) resemble those of other recently described rare species that are probably hybrids of better-known species, including those currently classified in different genera (Parham *et al.* 2001; Wink *et al.* 2001; Spinks *et al.* 2004). These putative hybrid taxa are diagnosed by characters that are usually restricted to the parental species. The distinctly mottled neck of *C. yunnanensis* is also found in *Chinemys reevesii*, a species native to Yunnan (Zhao & Adler 1993) that is commonly reared in Chinese turtle farms and has been implicated in at least three other hybridizations, including one with a *Cuora* (Yasukawa *et al.* 1992; Wink *et al.* 2001; Galgon & Fritz 2002). If *C. yunnanensis* was a hybrid of *Ch. reevesii* and a species of *Cuora*, *C. yunnanensis* would share a mtDNA haplotype with the maternal species. However, the evolutionary distinctiveness of *C. yunnanensis* has not been tested by using molecular data because of a lack of fresh tissue samples.

We surmounted this problem by using ancient DNA methods to sequence 1723 base pairs of mtDNA from a 1907 specimen of *C. yunnanensis* held in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris (MNHN 1907.10). We present the first, to our knowledge, molecular phylogenetic analysis of the genus *Cuora* with complete taxon sampling. We use these molecular data to evaluate the evolutionary distinctiveness of *C. yunnanensis* and two other species of *Cuora*, reportedly from Yunnan, that are critically endangered but which have not been documented in the wild (*C. mccordi* and *C. zhoui*).





## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

We sequenced an 831 bp piece of mtDNA that encodes part of the cytochrome oxidase subunit I (COI) gene and an 892 bp piece of mtDNA that encodes part of the NADH dehydrogenase subunit 4 (ND4) gene, the complete tRNAs histidine (His) and serine (Ser), and part of the tRNA leucine (Leu) from a specimen of *C. yunnanensis* (MNHN 1907.10; figure 1) that was recently identified in the Muséum of National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris (see electronic Appendix A for the history of the specimen). We also sequenced these mtDNA fragments from three specimens of *C. zhoui*, the only other *Cuora* species missing from the Stuart & Parham (2004) dataset, and one additional specimen each of *C. aurocapitata*, *C. flavomarginata*, *C. mccordi* and *C. pani*. (See electronic Appendix A for voucher information, GenBank accession numbers, sequencing protocols and methods of phylogenetic analyses.)

## 3. RESULTS

Parsimony and maximum-likelihood analyses recover the same hypothesis of phylogenetic relationships for *Cuora* (figure 1), except that one of the two equally most-parsimonious trees places *C. mouhotii* as sister to *C. amboinensis*. *Cuora yunnanensis* nests within the *Cuora* clade, and is moderately supported to be the sister taxon of *C. flavomarginata*. Together, *C. yunnanensis* and *C. flavomarginata* form a well-supported clade with *C. zhoui* and a 'C. trifasciata complex' containing three (*trifasciata*, *pani* and *aurocapitata*) potentially conspecific or recently diverged taxa (see Stuart & Parham (2004) for discussion). The mtDNA of *C. yunnanensis* is distinct from sampled specimens of all other known species. *Cuora yunnanensis* has an uncorrected pairwise sequence divergence of 4.9–5.0% from its sister taxon *Cuora flavomarginata*, a high-domed, terrestrial *Cuora* from northeastern China (Fong *et al.* 2002), and an uncorrected pairwise sequence divergence of 3.7–4.4% from *C. zhoui* and the 'C. trifasciata complex'.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The divergent mtDNA sequence obtained from the museum specimen implies that *C. yunnanensis* is not of recent hybrid origin, but rather represents a distinct evolutionary lineage. We included at least two individuals of every species of *Cuora* in our analysis, but we cannot rule out the possibility that *C. yunnanensis* matches a haplotype in an unknown distinct lineage that will be discovered by future sampling within the clade containing *C. flavomarginata*, *C. zhoui*, *C. aurocapitata*, *C. pani* and *C. trifasciata*.

China has the highest species richness, highest endemism and most threatened turtle fauna of any country in Asia (Stuart & Thorbjarnarson 2003), and *C. yunnanensis* represents the first recent documented loss to that fauna. The natural habitat of the high elevation (more than 2000 m) wetland 'Yunnan-Fu,' the type locality of *C. yunnanensis* and the extinct Kunming newt, *Cynops wolterstorffi* (Boulenger 1905; figure 1), has been destroyed by the expanding city of Kunming (Zhao 1998). The second locality for *C. yunnanensis* given by Boulenger (1906), 'Tongchuan-Fu' (= Dongchuan; figure 1), lies ca. 100 km north of Kunming. Lau & Shi (2000) reported that a suitable habitat for *C. yunnanensis* may still exist there, but no specimens have been found.

Two other species of *Cuora*, reportedly from Yunnan, *C. mccordi* and *C. zhoui*, also represent distinct lineages of *Cuora* (figure 1). Both are listed as critically endangered in the 2003 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN

2003), meaning that they are 'facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild'. Unlike *C. yunnanensis*, living specimens of *C. mccordi* and *C. zhoui* exist in captivity and command very high prices in the international pet trade. Despite their commercial value, few wild-caught individuals of *C. mccordi* and *C. zhoui* have appeared in trade since their description (Lau & Shi 2000), suggesting that they have become commercially extinct (IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group and Asian Turtle Trade Working Group 2000). *Cuora mccordi* and *C. zhoui* were described from pet trade and market specimens, are unknown in the wild and have no reliable localities (figure 1). If these species are not located and protected, they will soon become extinct in the wild like *C. yunnanensis*.

## Acknowledgements

Sequencing was conducted in The Field Museum's Pritzker Laboratory for Molecular Systematics and Evolution and operated with support from the Pritzker Foundation. Financial support to B.L.S. was provided by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (with Harold Voris and Robert Inger). This is UCMP contribution 1853. This work is LBNL-54722 and was performed under the auspices of the US Department of Energy, Office of Biological and Environmental Research. Richard Gemel, Vienna Natural History Museum (NMW) provided data on specimens in his care. The authors thank Ted Papenfuss for his encouragement and comments. Phil Spinks and Tortsen Blanck are thanked for discussions and ideas. The first extraction protocol used for the sample of *C. yunnanensis* is based on a protocol provided to us by Kerri Dugan of the Counterterrorism and Forensic Science Research Unit at the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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